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Syrian Leader Outmaneuvers Reagan & Co.

CIA analysts have been watching Syrian President Hafez Assad, the Middle East's chief troublemaker, with glum admiration.

Though the Israelis blasted his planes out of the skies, stopped his tanks in their tracks and thoroughly humiliated him in Lebanon, he has now succeeded in turning back the Israelis and confounding the Americans. Suddenly he is about to force upon Lebanon a government that will take its directions from Damascus.

It's not that he blindsided Reagan & Co. The president and his policy makers were fully aware of Assad's treacheries. He simply outwitted and outmaneuvered them.

They knew that Assad was conspiring against the peace effort while giving it lip service, that he was digging into new military positions in Lebanon while promising to withdraw, and that he was bolstering his armed forces while negotiating a settlement. They were also aware that he had a rousing hatred for Israel. Intelligence reports have consistently warned that he believes a military showdown with Israel is inevitable.

"When the blow comes," he is quoted as saying, "we will seize the opportunity and fight." The secret report telling of Assad's conversation emphasized that he used the Arab word "lamma"—which means "when," not "if."

His defense minister, Gen. Mustafa Talas, is quoted in the same cable as acknowledging that "all the Arabs combined are weaker than Israel." Yet he vowed that the Syrians would fight anyway "if not to gain a victory, at least to keep the war case hot between us and Israel."

Last January, the U.S. Embassy in Damascus cabled that Assad believes "a conflict with Israel will inevitably erupt during 1983" and that he "would not run away from a fight."

Despite these clear warnings, President Reagan has kept the Marines in Lebanon to guard the powder kegs in the midst of the incendiaries. The depressing record:

- Secretary of State George P. Shultz and former special envoy Philip C. Habib assured Reagan that in a matter of months the Lebanese army would be ready to take control of Lebanon. But top-secret intelligence reports warned that the Lebanese army was in far worse shape than anyone had imagined. I reported on Oct. 10, 1982, that the Marines, therefore, "may be in Lebanon for a lot longer than the American public has been led to believe."

- Shultz and Habib also persuaded the president that Assad would pull his forces out of Lebanon if the Israelis would withdraw. This was vigorously disputed by intelligence analysts. I reported on April 29 that "the Syrians will try to remain in Lebanon after Israeli troops and international peace-keeping forces agree to pull out."

- Reagan hailed Habib's statesmanship for arranging the withdrawal of the Palestine Liberation Organization from its embattled positions in Beirut. But I reported on Nov. 10, 1982, that the PLO fighters who left by the front door were returning by the back door. It was Assad, of course, who helped them slip back.

- Shultz and Habib told the president at first that the Soviet presence in Syria would be a restraining influence on Assad. But intelligence reports warned, on the contrary, that the Soviets would try to ignite a Syrian-Israeli clash. I publicized their warnings in columns on Feb. 25, April 3 and April 29. "So the American Marines," I wrote, "may find themselves in the middle of a conflict in which the Soviets have a huge stake. Even if a major explosion can be avoided in Lebanon, there are sure to be a spatter of little explosions."

To correct the mistakes of the past, Reagan must first of all admit them.